

Remembering
a Memorial Day sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner
at the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, May 28, 2006

READING from *The American Creed: a Biography of the Declaration of Independence* by Forrest Church

When the founders gathered one wiltingly hot July in Philadelphia to hammer out their dreams into a single, ringing declaration, they were fashioning precepts as sacred as they were secular. As a group, they were not notably religious men. But they were united, almost miraculously, in forging a union that transcended, even as it encompassed, the historical particularity of the present crisis. Fired with ardor and apprehension—the prospect of a long war, its outcome uncertain—America’s first citizens performed an almost perfect act of alchemy. In their crucible were transfigured the elements that would reflect America’s promise and set the measure for its fulfillment.

This new nation was, as the founders knew, an experiment. Like all experiments, it started with a precept, a “given”—in this case a set of truths so rock-ribbed and essential that they were deemed “self-evident.” Truth cast in language that, in turn, spells out the truth for succeeding generations deserves to be called a creed. So it is with Thomas Jefferson’s preamble to the Declaration of Independence. The faith of a nation is captured in its words, words that distill a mission while investing future citizens with a sacred charge.

“Creed” sounds forbidding and ecclesiastical. The American Creed is neither, but it is monumental. Creeds have to be monumental, struck in metal that, when refined in the furnace of history, and burnished by developing thought, can endure the trials of time. They have to be steadfast enough to redeem history itself, reawakening tired minds, rekindling passion in hearts grown weary. Creeds are spiritual touchstones. They are finished in fire, yet cool to the touch when passed from hand to hand one generation to the next.

Capturing the essence of the American experiment, the American Creed affirms those truth our founders held self-evident: justice for all, because we are all created equal; and, liberty for all, because we are all endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights. America’s fidelity to this creed is judged by history. Living up to it remains a constant challenge. But it invests our nation with a spiritual purpose and—if we honor its precepts—a moral destiny. (p. xi-xii)

SERMON

This morning’s service, while very much about Memorial Day and all those through the generations who have given their lives in service to this country, is also about stories, and their power not only to express reality, to but to create it as well. My favorite personal example of the this remarkable power of story is a small one, one that I have shared from this pulpit before, but which I am going to share again this morning.

You all know stories in families work—they get told over and over until only a few words convey the whole story to those in the know, and they often serve to solidify each person’s identity and place in the family.

In my family growing up there were a series of stories about my sister learning to talk, and some of the mistakes she made along the way. One of the most frequently told stories involved her confusion of the words dangerous and generous. It seemed to be a one way confusion—whenever she wanted to describe someone as generous, she always called them dangerous. "Thank you for the candy, Mom, you're very generous." We laughed about this often over the years, and during my internship year I even used the play on words to anchor a Thanksgiving sermon, talking about the idea of dangerous generosity. It was a fun story, and seemed to say something important about my sister, her use of language, and about her own generosity, which is significant.

Then, about five years ago, I was visiting my grandparents in Cincinnati and my grandmother pulled out a folder of letters from my family, including letters my mother had written when my sister and I were young. And there, in a letter from my mother was the story about the confusion of the words dangerous and generous, only it was me who made the mistake, not Sarah. Sarah hadn't even been born yet.

I immediately called my parents and told them, and we were all surprised. Mom said she could have sworn that it was Sarah who made the mistake. The story had been about my sister for so long it had become a part of her and who she is. It couldn't be about me. Knowing the truth didn't change the fact that it still feels as if Sarah was the one who complimented people by telling them that they were dangerous.

This is a small example of just how powerful the stories we tell ourselves can be. How many of us know people who think of themselves as either lucky or unlucky and remarkably enough their lives seem to prove their theory? How many of us have stories about who we are and how we came to be this way, stories that continue to affect who we are and the decisions we make in our lives? Sometimes these stories help us; they give us hope by reminding us of times we have survived a struggle or confirm for us a strength or gift we have. Sometimes these stories get in our way, particularly if they define us in ways that are limiting and perhaps not truly reflective of reality.

The power of story is undeniable. Most cultures and religions have at their heart stories—stories about how the world came to be, the place and purpose of human beings, how we can know right from wrong, and so on. We learn from and are inspired by the stories of people who have overcome great odds, or accomplished great things. We share our own lives with people through stories. I have come to believe that the process of falling in love is all about storytelling, as two people get to know each other through sharing tales of the events, large and small, that have shaped them and that reveal who they are and what they want from life. When people we love die, we keep them with us by telling stories.

I think about the themes and lessons that run through the dominant stories in my own life—that I am supposed to be responsible and easy to get along with; that my thoughts, hopes, and actions matter in the world; that life, though complicated, messy, and sometimes painful, is yet a gift and something to be treasured; that my family and friends will be there for me when I need them; that I am generally a cautious person and yet able to take great risks if something is important enough to me. I continue to see my life through the lens of these stories and their deeper messages. I am aware of how different my life would be, how different *I* would be if my experiences, my stories were different.

I know of far too many people whose early years contain experiences of abuse or neglect and whose primary stories about themselves revolve around their own unworthiness or brokenness. Far

too many children grow up hearing, either from their families or from society, whether because of their personality or their race or their sexual or gender identity or their family's economic status or a disability or challenge they have, that they are somehow unworthy, or less than those around them. Such stories become a powerful force in how someone acts in the world.

A good deal of modern talk therapy is about rewriting the stories of our lives so they become strengthening and sustaining rather than limiting and harmful. But, of course, many people don't have access to such an opportunity to examine and reframe the stories of who they are and who they might be.

The stories that make us who we are come from many places—our families first and foremost, our own experiences and our internal sense of self, our neighborhoods and schools and religious communities, our nation and culture and the wider world. Because of how powerful stories are in our lives, in our communities and in our world; because stories not only express reality but create it as well, it behooves us to pay attention to what stories we are telling ourselves and others.

I believe strongly that we are best served by stories that give us hope and purpose, that make our lives meaningful and valuable, that offer us a sense of belonging and connection. This does not mean making up stories, or completely ignoring stories that give us other, less positive messages, but rather that we need to be attentive to the stories we choose to tell. Whether we know it or not, we are always making choices about what stories will anchor our lives.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we remember and honor those who have given their lives in defense of this country and in defense of the ideals upon which this country was built. We tell their stories, as best we can.

It is a difficult and discouraging time in many ways—American soldiers and civilians continue to lose their lives in Afghanistan and Iraq; the Iraqi military, police, and civilians are dying at an even greater rate; military action against other nations of the world appears to be a real possibility; it appears some have nearly declared war against others living within our borders; our own hard-won liberties and opportunities seem to be at risk of being sacrificed to our fear; we are beginning to fear that the damage we are doing to our natural environment is irreversible. The connection between all these things and the founding values of this country feels tenuous at best. Many of the current calls for patriotism and support of our country ring false, calling for the stifling of discussion and dissent, things which have always been central to our national identity. I know many here and elsewhere are near despair about the direction of our country and our world; we cannot help but wonder at times if the experiment of America is headed for failure.

Given all of this, the lives lost recently in the name of our country seem a particularly painful sacrifice. War is an undeniably awful and brutal thing, even when the cause is just. When we doubt the justness of the cause, it is worse. War always has been and always will be one of the worst acts of humanity. At such a time, it is all too easy to lose faith in our country, in our government. To be in danger of losing faith in just about everything. For this and other reasons, I believe it is essential that we take a careful look at the stories we are telling ourselves about who we are as a nation and a people. Who we *could* be and who we are *called* to be.

George Will, in an editorial in the *Washington Post* this week makes the claim that “this is a creedal nation, one dedicated to certain propositions, not one whose origins and identity are bound up with ethnicity.” (*Washington Post*, Thursday, May 25, 2006) Unitarian Universalist

minister Forrest Church makes this same claim in the book from which I read earlier in the service.

In other words, America is a country based not on race, ethnicity, language, or even geography, but rather on a common story—a story of the search for freedom and equality, a story grounded in a commitment to genuine justice for all. As we all know, it is a story lived imperfectly, a story filled with as many failures of our ideals as successes. This moment in history makes some of those failures abundantly clear. And yet the fact that we have, thus far, lived the story and the ideals behind it imperfectly does not make it any less powerful, any less true, any less worth our work and sacrifice.

A few weeks ago I heard a member of the newly created Iraqi government on the radio speaking about his hopes for his country. I don't remember his exact words, but his basic message was that they needed to rewrite the story of their country—changing it from the story of a nation divided, often violently, by religious and ethnic differences to the story of a people joined together in the creation of a democratic and just nation.

I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task they face. To rewrite the story of a country is many times the challenge of rewriting the story of an individual—something that is hard enough. I found myself, usually an optimist when it comes to the potential for change and growth, wondering if such a thing was even truly possible. The story of strife and warfare, of mistrust and division runs deep not only in the lives of individuals in Iraq, but in the lifeblood of the country itself. As the much more trivial example of the story from my family illustrates, some stories cannot ever be fully changed.

I found myself deeply grateful for having been born into a country and culture where the founding story contains the highest and best of human aspiration. Let us hear, once again, the words which laid the foundation for this country, for a story unique in human history:

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation upon such principles, and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

What a remarkable declaration. How worthy still of our greatest efforts and our deepest hopes. Though these words are familiar to us all, they sometimes get lost in the fear and divisiveness of the present time. As Forrest Church writes:

When we forget our history—especially when we forget the principles on which our nation was founded—we also are doomed to fail to live up to it. We attack our own history as if we were investigative reporters, looking for the ugly truth behind its shining façade. By devoting so much energy to critiquing our past (a very American thing to do, by the way), we may, I fear, be losing an appreciation for the principles upon which America was established. Yes, our forebears often failed to live up to their ideals. This is partly because these ideals [are] so lofty. The greater our aspirations, the more certain it is that we will fail to live up to them. Such failure has its own nobility. Our ancestors set the bar high.

How the next generation answers the challenge posed by the American Creed matters enormously. At stake is not only the future of a nation but also—given America’s power and promise—the future of the world. To live up to the promise of our creed, we must rekindle aspirations for its attainment. (p. xvii)

We owe our best effort for this cause not only to those who gave their lives in service to this vision but also to *all* those who preceded us, and particularly to those who will follow us. The first step in this is remembering, remembering not just the times of failure but the glimpses of success as well, remembering especially the faith of the creed which binds us to one another.

I see all around us a tendency to lose sight of this founding and foundational vision, in a number of different ways. There are those who seem to want to rewrite our story to be one of triumph and dominance rather than of humility and hope. Those who want our story to be a story of victory for a particular religious perspective as well as a political and economic one. Those who have forgotten the experimental aspect of what we are doing, not to mention its fragile nature.

At the same time there are those who seem to find little of value in the American story, who see only the ways in which we have failed. Those who look at our beginnings and see only the violence and injustice in which our country is rooted. Those who seem to find little that is redeeming in the story of who we are.

Finally, there are those who see our story as one focused on ultimacy of the individual. The pursuit of happiness becomes a matter for the individual alone, and trumps any call to work for the common good. The ideal of liberty, in this story, is completely disconnected from any sense of responsibility.

Yes, all these themes can be read into the founding story of this country and all are being claimed as the truth of who we are. But I believe, with Forrest Church, that our story, our truth, our faith is much more noble than this. That we need to reclaim the highest and best of who we are through the vision and the words that gave us our birth. That we need, as every generation needs, to reclaim the American Creed as our own, and as one of the most remarkable achievements of the human race.

We Unitarian Universalists have an advantage in this task. The founding of our faith in this country is deeply intertwined with the founding of the country itself. Many who had a hand in the creation story of this nation were involved in the early years of Unitarianism and Universalism in America. The same high ideals that grounded the vision for our nation—the equality of all people, the fundamental right to freedom (including freedom of religion), the possibility of true justice—these are also part of the grounding of our religious faith and tradition as well.

Unitarian Universalism perhaps comes the closest of any religious tradition to the civil religion that binds us together as a country. We share faith in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, the goal of justice for everyone, the call to the common endeavor of building a land where these ideals are realized to the best of our ability, where we refuse to give up on our aspirations even in the face of fear and despair.

Let us lay claim, loudly and clearly, to the founding vision of this country, the vision for which so many have given their lives, the vision that reflects the hopes of our Unitarian Universalist heritage. Let us give up, for a time, our cynicism, doubt, and despair and hear with new ears those words which state for all to hear the equality of all people and the right to life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness. Let us give thanks for being a part of such a nation, such a people, and such a faith tradition which call us to such lofty goals, such momentous aspirations.

On this Memorial Day weekend, let us claim once again the American Creed and let us answer the call put forth by Abraham Lincoln nearly a hundred years after this Declaration of Independence was first made:

It is for us, the living...to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is...for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave their last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth. (Gettysburg Address)

May it be so. Amen.